SŪRAH 63

Al-Munāfiqūn

(The Hypocrites)

Prologue

Although the title *al-Munāfiqūn*, or The Hypocrites, indicates this *sūrah*'s subject matter, it is nonetheless not the only one that mentions hypocrisy and that describes the hypocrites' wicked scheming. Indeed, hardly any of the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah is without an express or implied reference to hypocrisy. However, the present *sūrah* is dedicated, almost entirely, to speaking about the hypocrites, referring to particular events and statements they made. The *sūrah* launches a strong attack against the hypocrites: their manners, lies, intrigue and wicked plots. It exposes their true feelings of hatred towards the Muslims, as also their cowardice and evil nature.

A warning is given at the end to the believers not to allow any of the characteristics of hypocrisy to creep near them. The first element of hypocrisy is not to be totally dedicated to God's cause, and to be instead preoccupied with money, property and children. Hypocrisy also entails slackening when invited to contribute financially to God's cause until a day comes when no such donation will be of any use.

The unbelievers' hypocrisy accelerated when Islam moved to Madīnah and continued to so grow until virtually the end of the Prophet's blessed life. Although evidence of such traits was almost uninterrupted, hypocrisy nonetheless acquired different aspects and

variously resorted to different tactics. Inevitably, such behaviour had a strong bearing on the events of the period, taking up much of the Muslim community's efforts, time and energy. Indeed, hypocrisy is frequently mentioned in the Qur'ān and *Ḥadīth*, thereby indicating how prevalent it had become.

In his biography of the Prophet, *Sīrat al-Rasūl: Ṣuwar Muqtabasah min al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Muḥammad Izzat Darwazah, devotes a fine chapter to this issue. The following paragraphs are especially revealing:

> There were obvious reasons for the phenomenon of hypocrisy to appear in Madīnah. The early Muslims in Makkah were neither strong enough nor influential enough to make a group of people fear them or try to appease them. Indeed, the people of Makkah, and its leaders and notables in particular, opposed the Prophet in a very open manner, inflicting much harm on the Muslims, and resorted to any measure within their means to check the new religion's advance In fact, they commanded much power. Because of this persecution the Muslims were subjected to some had to migrate to Abyssinia, and thereafter to Madīnah. In fact, some of them were subjected to such unbearable pressure that they had to renounce their faith: this as a result of either torture or the lure of temptation. So extreme did this become that a few even died under torture.
>
> In Madīnah, the situation was markedly different. Prior to his migration there, the Prophet was able to recruit a number of strong and influential followers from the two tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj. He migrated only after having made sure of the favourable situation there. Indeed, there was hardly an Arab house in Madīnah without its followers of Islam in the family. There were no doubt many who rejected Islam, either because they chose not to listen to its message or because they were full of hostility realizing that the Prophet's arrival in Madīnah threatened their position of leadership and influence. They realized, however, that they could not take an openly hostile attitude to the Prophet and his Muhājirīn and Anṣār followers. Moreover, tribal affiliation was an important factor preventing such open hostility. Indeed, the

broad majority of their own tribes, the Aws and the Khazraj, were now Muslim, giving sincere and devoted support to the Prophet. They were good Muslims who looked at the Prophet as their own supreme commander, and the guide they had to follow. Therefore, the ones who still entertained thoughts of idolatry and harboured rancour in their hearts, prompting them to seek to undermine Islam, felt that their only option was to pretend to be Muslim, appearing to fulfil their Islamic duties, declaring their continued loyalty to their tribes, while at the same time resorting to plots and intrigue. At times, however, their opposition did smack of hypocrisy, this usually when the Muslims faced some tough crisis, and here the 'pretenders' counselled caution, claiming that it was the only option that served Muslim interests. Needless to say, they did not acknowledge that they were in fact unbelievers. Nonetheless, their true attitude of hypocrisy did not go unnoticed by the Prophet and his Companions. Moreover, their stand at times of crises, counselling a policy of weakness, hardened them further in their hypocrisy and unbelief. Qur'ānic revelations time after time exposed and denounced their schemes, alerting the Prophet and the believers to the need to be very cautious in dealing with them.

The hypocrites' attitude and schemes had, according to the import of Qur'ānic revelations, a far-reaching effect. We feel that there was a determined struggle, reminiscent of that between the Prophet and the Makkan elders, but with a reversal in its outcome. Within a short period, the Prophet strengthened his position in Madīnah and his influence increased. Islam was spreading and consolidating its power base. The hypocrites were neither a solid group nor a clearly identified entity. As Islam was on the ascendancy, they grew weaker and thus their influence diminished.

To appreciate the threat posed by the hypocrites, particularly in the early period of Islam in Madīnah, we need to remember however that they could still call on tribal loyalties, which remained strong among the Arabs. Besides, they had not at this juncture exposed themselves. Nor had Islam as yet consolidated its influence on its new followers. Moreover, the Prophet was

surrounded by idolaters on all fronts. The people of Makkah continued to enjoy a position of great influence among the Arabs, and they were on the lookout for any chance to level a crushing defeat on the still fledgling Muslim State. The Jews in Madīnah were also not long in taking a hostile stance towards the Prophet and Islam. Indeed, they were quick to cement a natural alliance with the hypocrites, defining common objectives in opposition to the Muslim community. In fact, the hypocrites could not have caused so much harm to the Prophet and his followers had they not had the support of the Jews and the sort of alliance that the two groups forged. Nonetheless, their influence gradually weakened and the danger they represented subsided only after God foiled their schemes and enabled the Prophet to achieve victory over them.

Al-Munāfiqūn
(The Hypocrites)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

When the hypocrites come to you, they say, 'We bear witness that you are indeed God's Messenger.' God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars. (1)

إِذَا جَاءَكَ الْمُنَافِقُونَ قَالُوا نَشْهَدُ
إِنَّكَ لَرَسُولُ اللَّهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِنَّكَ
لَرَسُولُهُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ
لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١﴾

They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Evil indeed is what they do. (2)

اتَّخَذُوا أَيْمَانَهُمْ جُنَّةً فَصَدُّوا عَن سَبِيلِ
اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ سَاءَ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

That is because they professed to believe, then they renounced faith. So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding. (3)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ آمَنُوا ثُمَّ كَفَرُوا فَطُبِعَ عَلَىٰ
قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿٣﴾

When you see them, their outward appearance may please you; and when they speak, you listen to what they say. They are like propped-up timbers. They think that every shout is directed against them. They are the real enemy; so beware of them. May God destroy them! How perverse they are! (4)

وَإِذَا رَأَيْتَهُمْ تُعْجِبُكَ أَجْسَامُهُمْ ۖ
وَإِن يَقُولُوا تَسْمَعْ لِقَوْلِهِمْ ۖ كَأَنَّهُمْ
خُشُبٌ مُّسَنَّدَةٌ ۖ يَحْسَبُونَ كُلَّ صَيْحَةٍ
عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ هُمُ الْعَدُوُّ فَاحْذَرْهُمْ ۚ قَاتَلَهُمُ اللَّهُ ۖ
أَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٤﴾

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا يَسْتَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ
رَسُولُ اللَّهِ لَوَّوْا رُءُوسَهُمْ وَرَأَيْتَهُمْ
يَصُدُّونَ وَهُم مُّسْتَكْبِرُونَ ﴿٥﴾

When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance. (5)

سَوَآءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أَسْتَغْفَرْتَ لَهُمْ أَمْ
لَمْ تَسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ لَن يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٦﴾

As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk. (6)

هُمُ الَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ لَا تُنفِقُوا عَلَىٰ مَنْ
عِندَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ حَتَّىٰ يَنفَضُّوا ۗ وَلِلَّهِ
خَزَائِنُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِنَّ
الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿٧﴾

They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him.' To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand. (7)

يَقُولُونَ لَئِن رَّجَعْنَا إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ
لَيُخْرِجَنَّ الْأَعَزُّ مِنْهَا الْأَذَلَّ ۚ وَلِلَّهِ
الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
وَلَٰكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨﴾

They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.' All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know. (8)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تُلْهِكُمْ أَمْوَالُكُمْ
وَلَا أَوْلَادُكُمْ عَن ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ ۚ
وَمَن يَفْعَلْ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ
الْخَاسِرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Believers! Do not let your riches or your children make you oblivious of the remembrance of God. Those who do so will surely be the losers. (9)

Give, then, out of what We have provided for you, before death comes to any of you, and then he says, 'My Lord, if You would grant me a delay for a short while, I would give in charity and be one of the righteous.' (10)

وَأَنفِقُوا مِن مَّا رَزَقْنَاكُم مِّن قَبْلِ أَن
يَأْتِيَ أَحَدَكُمُ الْمَوْتُ فَيَقُولَ رَبِّ
لَوْلَا أَخَّرْتَنِي إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ قَرِيبٍ فَأَصَّدَّقَ
وَأَكُن مِّنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come. God is fully aware of all that you do. (11)

وَلَن يُؤَخِّرَ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهَا ۚ
وَاللَّهُ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Ugly Hypocrisy

The *sūrah* begins with a description of the hypocrites' attempt to disguise the truth of their unbelief. They declare themselves Muslim and testify that the Prophet is God's Messenger. They swear by God so as to convince the Muslims, while they themselves know that they are lying. Their oaths are merely a shield behind which they hope to hide their true reality and deceive the Muslims:

> *When the hypocrites come to you, they say, 'We bear witness that you are indeed God's Messenger.' God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars. They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Evil indeed is what they do.* (Verses 1–2)

They would go to the Prophet and state that they bore witness that he was God's Messenger, but theirs was only a verbal testimony lacking all conviction. They were merely engaging in deception, hoping to hide their truth from the Muslim community and so protect themselves. Therefore, God states that they were lying while making clear the truth of His message to the Prophet Muḥammad: "*God knows that you are truly His Messenger and He bears witness that the hypocrites are indeed liars.*" (Verse 1)

The phraseology here is both precise and precautionary. We note how the verse begins by confirming the truth of the Prophet's message before it states that the hypocrites' oaths were false. Without taking such care in its wording, the verse could suggest that denunciation of the hypocrites as liars applies to the subject matter of their statement, namely the Prophet's message. The verse intends no such thing. What it aims to do is to state the truth, making it clear that they did not really believe that the Prophet's message was true. In other words, they are not sincere in their statement.

"*They use their oaths as a cover.*" (Verse 2) This short statement suggests that they used to swear an oath every time they feared exposure, or whenever one of their schemes was uncovered, or some of what they said about Muslims was reported. They hoped that such oaths would protect them from the consequences of their exposure. Thus they used their false faith as a shield to hide their reality and allow them a chance to go on with their plots and schemes against the Muslim community. Thus, "*they turn people away from the path of God.*" They kept themselves and others away from God's path, using their false oaths for that end. "*Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verse 2) Could there be anything worse than lying to mislead and deceive others?

The *sūrah* explains the reasons behind their behaviour, making it clear that they knowingly reverted to disbelief after having accepted Islam: "*That is because they professed to believe, then they renounced faith. So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 3) Thus, whilst they have known what it means to accept faith, they nonetheless chose to revert to disbelief. No heart that has a sound understanding or appreciation of things, or indeed has life, would experience life under faith and then choose to return to disbelief. How can anyone who understands, appreciates and experiences the concept of life that faith promotes, with its view of the universe, and also breathes the fresh air of faith and lets the light of faith shine over his world wish to revert to the miserable and suffocating darkness of unfaith? None will make such a choice except he who is filled with grudges that blind his sight and blunt his senses. Hence, such people are in the miserable condition the verse describes: "*So, a seal has been set on their hearts and therefore they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 3)

The *sūrah* draws a unique picture of such people inviting ridicule and describing them as aimless, leading a futile existence, and nursing grudges. It presents an image of them that serves as an object of ridicule:

> *When you see them, their outward appearance may please you; and when they speak, you listen to what they say. They are like propped-up timbers. They think that every shout is directed against them. They are the real enemy; so beware of them. May God destroy them! How perverse they are!* (Verse 4)

Thus, they are merely an outward appearance, not real human beings who respond and interact. They may look pleasant to the eye as long as they remain silent, but when they speak they show themselves to be devoid of sense and feeling. They are like timbers, but not just any kind of wood: they are propped up against a wall, unable to move. This stone-cold picture shows the reaction of their souls, that is if they have souls at all. This is then complemented with a state of constant apprehension, perpetual fear and uncertainty: "*They think that every shout is directed against them.*" (Verse 4) They know themselves to be hypocrites, covered by a thin veil of pretence, false oaths and attempts to appease. Hence, they live under the constant dread that their reality will be exposed. The *sūrah* shows them always turning around, dreading every move and every shout. They imagine that every cry is setting a chase after them. Thus, spiritually, they are like propped up pieces of wood, but when it is a question of fear for one's life or property, they look like a trembling reed in a storm. In both cases, they are the main enemy of the Prophet and the Muslim community: "*They are the real enemy; so beware of them.*" They are the enemy within, hiding within Muslim ranks. Hence, they represent a greater danger than the external enemy. Therefore, the Prophet is instructed to beware of them. He is not, however, instructed here to kill them. Instead, he was to pursue a different course of action, one that reflected much wisdom and confidence that their schemes would come to nothing.

"*May God destroy them! How perverse they are!*" (Verse 4) God will indeed be their enemy wherever they turn. Such a prayer by God

Almighty means a verdict that is certain to take place. It is their inevitable outcome, as history has clearly shown.

Stirring Up Trouble

The *sūrah* continues to describe their actions, revealing the rancour in their hearts. It shows how they schemed against the Prophet, yet were quick with their lies when exposed. These were their known qualities:

> *When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance. As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk. They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him.' To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand. They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.' All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know.* (Verses 5–8)

Several early scholars confirm that these verses relate to an incident in which 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy featured prominently. Ibn Isḥāq gives a detailed account of it in his report on the expedition to forestall a planned attack by the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe:

> The Muslims were still encamping at the spring which provided the stage for their battle. Servants were taking horses to the water to drink. Among them was Jahjāh, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's servant. Apparently, there was some scrambling at the water among the servants. Jahjāh clashed with an 'ally' of the Khazraj, named Sinān ibn Wabr. Neither man seemed to be endowed with much wisdom: punches were exchanged and each appealed to his 'group' for help. Jahjāh called on the Muhājirīn to defend him, while Sinān called on the Anṣār. 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy felt very angry when he heard of

this. He was attended by a group of his people, including a young man called Zayd ibn Arqam. He said to them: "I have never known such humiliation as has befallen us today. They [the Muhājirīn] are now standing up to us in our own home town. They are ungrateful to us for our favours. Our case with the refugees of the Quraysh is an apt example of the proverb: 'Fatten your dog and he will eat you.' When we go back to Madīnah the honourable among the two of us will certainly chase the humble out of it. You have only yourselves to blame for all this. You have taken them into your own homes and given them your own money until they have become rich. I swear that if you stop helping them with what you have, they will leave you and go elsewhere."

Zayd ibn Arqam recounted all this to the Prophet who was attended by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. 'Umar suggested that the Prophet should command 'Abbād ibn Bishr to kill 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy. The Prophet said: "How would you like it, 'Umar, if people started to say that Muḥammad is killing his Companions? Indeed, I shall not do that. However, give orders to depart now." Thus, these orders were given at a time when the Prophet never used to depart.

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy learnt that the Prophet had been told what he had said. He therefore hastened to him and denied any knowledge of what had been attributed to him. He swore by God that he did not say anything of the sort. Those of the Prophet's Companions who were present tried to pacify matters. They were still keen that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy should be given his chance to accept Islam. After all, he had been well respected among his people before the advent of Islam. They suggested to the Prophet that Zayd ibn Arqam might have misquoted or misheard 'Abdullāh.

When the orders were given to march, Usayd ibn Ḥuḍayr, a prominent figure among the Anṣār, came to the Prophet, greeted him with the respect due to him as Messenger of God and said: "Prophet, I see that you are marching at a time of day when you used not to march." The Prophet said to him: "Have you not heard what your friend said?" When Usayd asked for details, the Prophet told him that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had said that "the

honourable among the two of us will chase the humble out of Madīnah." Usayd said: "Yes indeed, Messenger of God. You can turn him out of Madīnah if you like. You are the honourable and he is the humble." Usayd then pleaded clemency and told the Prophet: "God has sent you to us when his people were preparing to crown him king. He may think that you have robbed him of his kingdom."

The Prophet marched at the head of the Muslims for the rest of the day and throughout the night, and continued marching until mid-morning, when it was burning hot. He then allowed his Companions to stop. Hardly had they sat down when they all fell asleep. This the Prophet did in order that people would not be preoccupied with what 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had said.

Shortly afterwards, the *sūrah* entitled *al-Munāfiqūn*, or The Hypocrites, was revealed. It describes the hypocrites and their feelings towards the Muslims and it also states the very words said by 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy and conveyed to the Prophet by Zayd ibn Arqam. There was no longer any doubt as to the accuracy of Zayd's report. The Prophet held Zayd's ear in his hand and said: "This is the one who made good use of his ear for the sake of God."

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy had a son whose name was also 'Abdullāh. Unlike his father, 'Abdullāh was a good believer who entertained no doubt about the truthfulness of Muḥammad's message. Indeed, the Prophet was so certain of 'Abdullāh's strong faith that he appointed him to deputize for him in his absence when the Prophet headed the Muslim army on their final expedition to Badr. Moreover, 'Abdullāh was a dutiful son to his father. It was a cause of distress to him that his father acted against the Prophet. He would have done anything to bring his father within the Muslim fold. When he heard that his father uttered those wicked comments against the Prophet and the Muhājirīn he realized that this crime was a capital one. He also learnt that some of the Companions of the Prophet had counselled him to get rid of 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy. 'Abdullāh, the son, went to the Prophet and spoke to him: "Messenger of God, I have heard that you intend to kill 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy for what was reported to you as his words. If you must kill him,

then you have only to command me and I will bring you his head. The tribe of al-Khazraj [his own tribe] is fully aware that I am its most dutiful son to his father. However, I fear that if you order someone else to kill him, I may not be able to look at my father's killer walking in the street. I may be moved to kill him. If I do so, I would be killing a believer in revenge for an unbeliever. Hell would then be my doom." The Prophet smiled and calmed him down. He said to 'Abdullāh: "We will be kind to him and treat him well as long as he is with us."

'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy remained in Madīnah and he never lost an opportunity to speak ill of Islam and the Prophet. His credibility, however, was eroded. Whenever he said or did something, his own people were the first to take issue with him and remonstrate with him, trying to make him see his error. When this was apparent, the Prophet said to 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the first to suggest that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy should be killed: "Now do you see, 'Umar? Had I killed him when you suggested that to me, some people would have been very angry, while they themselves would be prepared to kill him now if I would only order them to do so." 'Umar replied: "I certainly know that God's Messenger knows better than I do and his actions are more blessed than mine."[1]

It is reported by 'Ikrimah, Ibn Zayd and others that when the people went back to Madīnah, 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's son stood at the entrance to Madīnah with his sword in his hand. People passed by, then his father arrived. The son said to him: 'Stand back.' He said: 'What is the matter with you?' He said: 'By God! You shall not pass this point until God's Messenger gives you permission. He is the honourable and you are the humble.' When the Prophet arrived, for he used to walk at the rear of the army to look after anyone who may be in need of help, 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy complained to him about his son. The son said: 'By God, he will not enter until you, Messenger of God, so permit him.' The Prophet

1. For a fuller treatment of this event, see, Adil Salahi (2002), *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, pp. 407–411. – Editor's note.

permitted him to go in, at which juncture the son said: 'Now that God's Messenger has given you permission, you may walk in.'

Dealing with Hypocrisy

When we consider the events and look at the people involved, as also the Qur'ānic comments, we see the divine method of cultivating the first Muslim community and we marvel at how God conducts matters and events.

Thus, we see the first Muslim community infiltrated by hypocrites who live within its ranks for almost ten years, during the Prophet's lifetime, and he does not expel them. In fact, God does not make them known to him by name or person until shortly before his own death. He would know such a one only by the tone of his speech, the way he twisted words and tried to hide things. He also knew them by their reactions to things and events. God had willed this so that people were not allowed to judge others' intentions and hearts. Judgement on these is for God alone. He alone knows what people harbour in their hearts and He alone requires people to account for them. As for us, we judge people by what we see before our eyes. Thus, no one is judged on the basis of suspicion. Even when God identified for His Messenger those who remained hypocrites until shortly before his death, the Prophet did not expel them from the Muslim community when they continued to put up a show that they were Muslims and fulfilled Islamic obligations. Instead, he kept such knowledge to himself, informing only one of his Companions, Ḥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān, of their identity. Neither of them publicized the information. Indeed, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb wanted to be sure even of himself. Hence he went to Ḥudhayfah to ask him whether the Prophet had mentioned him as being among the hypocrites. Ḥudhayfah would only reply that he was not one of them, adding no further information. The Prophet was also ordered not to pray for any of them who might have died. His Companions would thus know by his absence from the *janāzah* prayer [i.e. the prayer for a dead person] that the deceased was among the hypocrites. After the Prophet's own death, Ḥudhayfah also refrained from attending the *janāzah* prayer of any hypocrite mentioned to him by the Prophet. 'Umar too would not

offer the *janāzah* prayer for a dead person until he had made sure that their faith had remained untainted. If he saw Ḥudhayfah attending the prayer, he too would offer it. If not, he would not offer it either, but also would say nothing about this.

Thus events moved, as God had willed, fulfilling their intended purposes. They served to provide lessons and to cultivate the minds, manners and morals of the Muslim community. Furthermore, the event which led to the revelation of these verses serves to point out a number of values.

We see first 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy: a man living among the Muslim community, close to the Prophet. Events take place in succession and signs of different sorts are seen, all confirming the truth of the Islamic faith and the message preached by the Prophet. Yet 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's heart is not responsive to faith. Apparently, God has not granted him the blessing of accepting faith. Something stands between him and this great flow of light: it is the grudge he harbours for not being made king of the Aws and Khazraj. He had been all but proclaimed king when the people of Madīnah began to accept Islam, following the Prophet's arrival there. This was enough for him to turn away from Islam and its divine guidance, regardless of how it was confirmed by evidence and signs aplenty. Indeed, he lived in the midst of the Muslim community, witnessing the radical change Islam brings into people's lives.

We also see his son, also named 'Abdullāh, a superior example of a dedicated Muslim. He is so miserable because of his father's attitude and so ashamed of him. Yet, he feels for him the love a dutiful son has for his father. He hears that God's Messenger wants his father dead, and he experiences greatly different emotions. He faces these with all frankness and seriousness. He is committed to Islam, loves God's Messenger and is keen to fulfil his orders, even when these are against his own father. Yet he cannot condone the thought that anyone should kill his father or that such a person would walk freely after having done that. He fears that he might weaken and that he will not overcome the desire to take revenge. Therefore, he goes to his leader, the Prophet, requesting his help in how best to deal with the conflicting emotions that so troubled him. He requests that if the Prophet wants his father killed, then he should

let him be the one to carry this out. He would so obey the Prophet and do as he was told. Otherwise, if someone else killed his father, he might kill that person in revenge, thus taking the life of a believer in revenge for an unbeliever. He would then face tremendous difficulties in the life to come.

What we see here is truly awesome. It is the greatness of faith deeply enshrined in a believer's heart. The man offers the Prophet the opportunity to assign to him one of the hardest ever actions a human being can face: to kill his own father. He is sincere in his offer, and his purpose is to avoid something that has worse and graver consequences: to kill a believer in revenge for an unbeliever, thus incurring a sin that could land him in hell. We are amazed at his absolute sincerity and by the way in which he faces his human weakness towards his father. He says to the Prophet: "By God, all my tribe, the Khazraj, are fully aware that they have no son who is more dutiful towards his father than I am." He does not want the Prophet to change any orders he gives concerning his father. He knows that whatever the Prophet orders must be obeyed. All he wants is that he should be the one to carry out those orders, so as not to succumb to human weakness later on.

Impressed by such feelings of a man with profound faith, the Prophet kindly and compassionately removes all difficulty from him, saying that as far as his father is concerned: "We will be kind to him and treat him well as long as he is with us." Prior to this, the Prophet had also stopped 'Umar who had advocated that 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy be killed by one of his tribesmen, saying: "How would you like it, 'Umar, if people started to say that Muḥammad is killing his Companions?"

We also note with admiration how the Prophet reacted as a wise, inspired leader to quell the event. He ordered the Muslims' immediate departure, and continued marching with his army to the point of fatigue. His aim was to distract people from any thought of blind tribal loyalty, which the cries of the two fighting men might have stirred. He wanted to quell the sort of strife instigated by the hypocrite 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy who aimed to destroy the feelings of love and brotherhood that existed between the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār. These feelings were of a unique type, previously unknown in human history. We similarly note the Prophet's remarks to Usayd ibn Ḥuḍayr, which sought to mobilize

his Companions spiritually against discord and strife. He wanted the man who aimed to sow discord to be stopped by his own people as he still enjoyed a high position among them.

Finally, the last scene is amazing: 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, a firm believer, holds his sword at the entrance gate to Madīnah to prevent his father's entry. He wanted his father's own words to come true. It was he who said: "When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible." He wanted him to know that God's Messenger was the more honourable and that he himself was the contemptible one. He forced him to stand there until the Prophet arrived and gave him permission to enter, showing him in practical measures to whom true honour belonged.

It is to such a high summit that those people attained through faith. Yet they remained ordinary humans, experiencing all human feelings and frailties. This is the most beautiful characteristic of this faith when people understand it as it should be understood. They then become its practical image, in the form of humans who eat food and walk the streets.

Arrogance and Deprivation

We will now discuss the Qur'ānic verses that refer to those events: "*When they are told, 'Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,' they turn their heads away. You see them drawing back in arrogance.*" (Verse 5) They perform their actions, say whatever they may say, and then if they realize that the Prophet heard of their behaviour they resort to cowardly ways. They swear an oath in an attempt to protect themselves. If, when feeling secure that they do not have to face the Prophet, someone says to them, '*Come, so that God's Messenger may ask forgiveness for you,*' they turn away in arrogance. Both characteristics of cowardice and arrogance go hand in hand among hypocrites. However, such behaviour normally belongs to those who hold position and influence among people, yet feel themselves too weak for direct confrontation. They resort to arrogant behaviour as long as they do not have to confront the truth. Yet when they are confronted with it, cowardice and false oaths are their mark.

Therefore, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, telling him what God has determined in the hypocrites' case, and since God's judgement has been passed, there is no longer any use in praying for their forgiveness: "*As for them, it is all the same whether you pray for their forgiveness or you do not pray. God will not forgive them; for God does not bestow His guidance on such transgressor folk.*" (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* goes on to relate some aspects of their transgression that were the cause of God's judgement: "*They are the ones who say [to one another]: 'Do not give anything to those who are with God's Messenger, so that they may abandon him'.*" What they say betrays their wickedness and spitefulness. Their plan to starve the Prophet's Companions is the same strategy employed by all opponents of truth and faith in all generations and communities. In their perverted view, they think that all people are like them in giving paramount importance to food and survival. This was the plan the Quraysh followed when they imposed a total boycott on the Hāshimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, so that they would abandon him and hand him over to them. As we are told in this verse, it was also the plan upheld by the hypocrites. They hoped that it would ensure that, once hunger had bitten hard among the believers, they would abandon the Prophet. The communists did the same when they denied the religious among their people the right to their rations. They wanted them to starve to death, or at least until they abandoned their faith in God and stopped praying. Today, the same plan is adopted by other forces hostile to Islamic revival in the Muslim world. They place believers under siege, starving them and closing down all avenues of earning a living.[2]

Thus, we see the opponents of faith, old and new, resorting to this obnoxious and dreadful method, forgetting the simple truth of which the Qur'ān reminds them in the same verse: "*To God belong the treasures of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites cannot understand.*" (Verse 7) It is indeed from these treasures of the heavens and the earth, which all

2. More recent examples may be given to confirm what the author says. The latest of these is seen in the boycott imposed by Israel and its allies on the Palestinians, causing extreme hardship and starvation so as to force them to abandon their right to their land and homes. – Editor's note.

belong to God Almighty, that these enemies of the truth receive their livelihoods; yet they try to control the means of such livelihood available to believers. Yet they cannot even create their own sustenance. How stupid and dull-minded they are when they think they can stop others from receiving their sustenance!

God thus reassures the believers and strengthens their resolve to face up to such vile and odious plans. He tells them that God's treasures in the heavens and the earth are open to all. He who gives out of these treasures to His enemies will never forget the ones who believe in Him. In His grace, He does not impose mass starvation even on His enemies. He knows that if He were to deny them their provisions they would have nothing. Yet He is too merciful to abandon His servants, even the ones hostile to Him, to what is beyond their means of control. Mass starvation is a method adopted only by the most vile, obnoxious and wicked of people.

The *sūrah* also quotes the hypocrites' other words: "*They say, 'When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely drive out those who are contemptible.*" (Verse 8) We have seen how 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy's words were made to come true at the hands of his own son, ensuring that the contemptible one could only enter Madīnah by the permission of the most honourable one. "*All honour belongs to God, His Messenger and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know.*" (Verse 8) God includes with Himself His Messenger and the believers, bestowing His own honour on them. This is a gesture of honouring that only God can bestow. What is more honourable than God's hand placing the Prophet and the believers next to Himself and saying: 'Here We are, standing under the banner of honour, and this is the rank of the honourable.'

God certainly tells the truth as He intertwines honour with faith in a believer's heart. Such is the honour that derives from God's own honour. It never shrinks, gives way or abandons a believer, not even in the most difficult of times, unless his faith weakens. When faith is solidly established in a person's heart, honour and dignity remain solid within him. "*But the hypocrites do not know.*" (Verse 8) How are they to know when they do not appreciate this sort of honour and dignity and are cut off from their eternal source?

Time to Be Charitable

The last address in the *sūrah* is made to the believers whom God placed, together with His Messenger, in His own rank, making them share in His honour and dignity. He wants them to climb to this high summit, ridding themselves of any characteristic that is akin to those of the hypocrites. They should prefer such superior elevation to everything else, including their property and offspring. Nothing must be allowed to divert their attention from aspiring to such lofty heights:

> *Believers! Do not let your riches or your children make you oblivious of the remembrance of God. Those who do so will surely be the losers. Give, then, out of what We have provided for you, before death comes to any of you, and then he says, 'My Lord, if You would grant me a delay for a short while, I would give in charity and be one of the righteous.' God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come. God is fully aware of all that you do.* (Verses 9–11)

Money and children can preoccupy a person making him oblivious to everything else, that is, unless his heart alerts him to the aim of his existence, making him feel that he has a superior goal. This goal must be one that is worthy of the creature in whom God has blown of His own spirit, giving him the aspiration to achieve a few divine characteristics, albeit within his own human limitations. God has given him riches and offspring so as to fulfil his task of building human life on earth, but not so that he is so fully preoccupied with them that they distract him from remembering God and from being in contact with the source of his humanity. Those that are so distracted "*will surely be the losers.*" (Verse 9) The first thing they lose is their human identity, which is dependent on maintaining the bond with the source of man's humanity. Whoever loses himself has lost everything, regardless of the size of his wealth and the number of his offspring.

With respect to charitable donations, the *sūrah* here touches their hearts in several ways: "*Give, then, out of what We have provided for you.*" (Verse 10) This reminds us of the source of all that we have. It is all from God in whom we believe and who instructs us to be generous

and charitable. Such giving should be done "*before death comes to any of you...*" It should be a result of the person's own action before death overtakes him and he leaves everything behind for others to enjoy. If he does not do so then he will look around only to discover that he has put nothing forward for his own salvation. This is the worst stupidity and the greatest loss.

He will then feel pangs of regret and wish he could have more time to be charitable and join with those people who are righteous. Such wishes benefit him nothing, for "*God does not grant a delay to any soul when its term has come.*" (Verse 11) How can he now put forward anything when the chance is gone? "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 11) Several touches within a short space are thus made at the right place, immediately after depicting the hypocrites' characteristics and their scheming against the believers. When the believers stand firm in God's own rank, they will be protected against the hypocrites. It serves them well, then, to fulfil the duties that their faith requires of them. They must never abandon their remembrance of God, as this is the source of their ultimate safety. Thus does God use the Qur'ān to educate and cultivate believers' minds and hearts.